

Books of The Times

Tears and Thoughts for J.F.K.

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

"JOHNNY, WE HARDLY KNEW YE." *Memories of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.* By Kenneth P. O'Donnell and David F. Powers with Joe McCarthy. 434 pages. Little, Brown. \$8.95.

THE KENNEDY PROMISE. *The Politics of Expectation.* By Henry Fairlie. 376 pages. Doubleday. \$7.95.

To read back to back these two books on the Presidency of John F. Kennedy is to experience a wrenching transition between two states of mind. For "Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye" (awful title) is not only what must surely be one of the last "inside" memoirs of the Kennedy Administration—by two members of his so-called Irish Mafia, Kenneth P. O'Donnell, appointments secretary, and the court jester and friend-in-waiting David F. Powers; it also recalls the great flood of memoirs and tears that followed the President's assassination. (This book is, one might say, the last sniffle.) And "The Kennedy Promise: The Politics of Expectation," by the English political journalist Henry Fairlie, is another in what appears now to be a growing flood of books highly critical of the Kennedy Era, of which Garry Wills's "Bare Ruined Choirs" and David Halberstam's "The Best and the Brightest" are the most prominent examples that come to mind.

The contrast of attitudes here could not of course be more striking. O'Donnell and Powers—with the ghostly aid of Joe McCarthy, a freelance writer and early Kennedy biographer—recall him as a friend, a leader and a hero who made no mistakes in his career, not even when he spurned the bubbletop on his limousine on that last fateful day (contrary to popular opinion, the bubbletop was not bulletproof). Fairlie, on the other hand, regards Kennedy's charismatic heroism as a major cause of what went wrong with this country in the 1960's.

2 Views of Missile Crisis

O'Donnell and Powers conclude their account of the Cuban Missile Crisis with the somewhat fatuous point that it was a great moment in modern history because it eliminated nuclear confrontation from the scenario and left us with relatively benign forms of conflict like guerrilla warfare, conventional weapons, Vietnam. Fairlie, in contrast, embraces another form of fatuousness by assuring us that the missile crisis needn't have happened at all—it was simply a consequence of Kennedy's crisis approach to foreign affairs—yet by failing to present us with a plausible alternative script. (Since Fairlie accepts the necessity of the cold war and does not blame Truman or Eisenhower for waging their end of it, one must assume he is blaming Kennedy for not quietly ending it.)



Head of Kennedy
by Robert Berks.

O'Donnell and Powers assure us absolutely that Kennedy planned to get out of Vietnam and would have done so had he lived and been re-elected. Fairlie treats Vietnam—or at least what he calls "Guerrilla Warfare and Guerrilla Government"—as symptomatic of the Kennedy Administration's deepest flaws. O'Donnell and Powers convey the impression that the shining hour of Camelot was the high point of their lives and of the 20th century. Fairlie concludes that Camelot was . . . just that!—King Arthur's Round Table set down in the conference halls and war rooms of a 20th-century technological bureaucracy.

And which book are we to believe? Well, I think if we put our hearts and minds in order, we can believe both of them up to a point. O'Donnell and Powers are not analysts of history. Their book is aptly subtitled "Memories of John Fitzgerald Kennedy"; they are recalling events as they viewed them from next to the President's elbow (actually it is O'Donnell who does the recalling, while Powers only pipes up now and then with an anecdote or wisecrack). And it would be hard for anyone who experienced the Kennedy years with a modicum of sympathy and excitement to resist these memories, this gossip, this sentimentality. If we wept at Kennedy's death, then we are entitled to this final sniffle.

'Crusade Against What?'

Yet, anyone who experienced the years that followed will also find much merit in Fairlie's argument. When he picks apart Kennedy's famous inaugural address and points out that it neglected domestic affairs, that it assumed an unwarranted political consensus in the nation and that it seemed to be calling for nothing less than an international crusade, it is hard to deny that even in the throes of excitement and admiration for the style, one found oneself wondering, "Crusade against what?" When Fairlie argues that there were faint but unmistakable echoes of Rousseau's totalitarian General Will in Kennedy's demand that Americans "ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country," it is hard to resist Fairlie's conclusion that Rousseau's General Will would eventually become Johnson's General Westmoreland. And when Fairlie makes the nice point that the Kennedy style of politics engaged fantasies that didn't belong in the objective world of politics, it is difficult to ignore this as a possible explanation for the "politics of confrontation" that dominated the 1960's and the reaction that has set in since.

Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. But there are, after all, the heart and the mind to be considered. The heart and O'Donnell and Powers remind us that John Kennedy was exciting, young, part of a new generation, when he became President in 1961; and that one identified with him. The mind and Fairlie remind us that perhaps it should be the province of kings and queens to make us identify—and not Presidents. And in the heart and the mind together, there is room for both sorts of books.